

I 2/2/77 House committee backs extension of Sprague's assassination probe

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—The House Rules Committee approved a resolution yesterday that would allow the House Select Committee on Assassinations to remain in operation until March 31.

The House created the 12-member panel last September to investigate the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Its term expired at the end of the 94th Congress. Plans to revive the committee for the 95th Congress ran into opposition because of its proposed \$6.5 million-a-year budget and objections to the conduct of its chief counsel, former Philadelphia First Assistant District Attorney Richard A. Sprague.

By a voice vote, the Rules Committee decided to let the full House vote on a resolution to continue the assassinations committee until March 31.

The committee has been operating since Jan. 1 under resolutions that authorize expenditures of \$84,000 a month. Sponsors of the new resolution said that the same sum presumably would be provided for February and March.

Resolutions to extend the life of the committee have been offered to the House twice before. One resolution was considered under the unanimous-consent rule and was defeated by the negative vote of one congressman. The second resolution was introduced under a special rule that required a two-thirds majority for passage, instead of a simple majority, and did not permit the addition of amendments. It was withdrawn before the vote, when its sponsors realized that they did not have the necessary votes. The resolution was then referred to the Rules Committee for hearings.

Rep. Don Edwards (D., Calif.), a critic of the committee, said he had been concerned by press reports that said Sprague planned "to purchase two tiny transmitters that can be hidden in clothing of an investigator during questioning of potential witnesses."

Edwards said he was also worried about Sprague's plans to hold public hearings "even if the disclosures

might affect individuals or government agencies only indirectly connected to the murders."

He said, however, that he had been assured "that the constitutional rights of witnesses and all persons interviewed will be protected."

Edwards said the new resolution requires that the assassinations committee stick more closely to House rules, thus guaranteeing due process of law.

Members of the rules committee did not say whether they planned to extend the committee beyond March 31, but Sprague was clearly an issue in the controversy.

"It is obvious Mr. Sprague has been running the committee and making policy," said House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill (D., Mass.). "Now we have a new chairman."

The previous chairman, Rep.

Thomas N. Downing (D., Va.), retired at the end of last year. He is being replaced by Rep. Henry Gonzalez (D., Tex.).

Rep. Stewart B. McKinney (R., Tex.) defended Sprague's conduct, calling him "one of the finest investigators I have run across." He denied allegations that the committee is including the FBI and the CIA as subjects of its investigation, arguing that many committee aides have worked for the two agencies.

Rep. James H. Quillen (R., Tenn.) said the investigation should "be put on the back burner" during the natural-gas crisis.

"I have been receiving mail from constituents asking, 'Why is your committee considering a 13-year-old assassination when we are cold in our homes. Why not get down to the business of the people?'"